Accelerating Degrowth? Accelerationism and Degrowth as contradictory soulmates

Have you ever heard of Google's page rank? Even if, I doubt you were aware of the influence this algorithm has on our society. Page Rank is the algorithm ranking your google search results. In the 1990s search engines like Yahoo indicated the importance of websites manually, the results shown to the user were a product of human decisions. Back then Larry Page and other Google pioneers developed Page Rank: the idea was to create an algorithm that would deliver information about the importance of a certain website without human intervention, just derived from the network itself. The rank is calculated by the number and network power of the pages interlinked with a website. Page Rank is a means of power and of making profit. Power, not only because Google will make your website disappear if you criticize them, but more because it has become a main source of human information, and because it exploits those with fewer network power and rewards those who can draw more attention from the people – the more network power, the more important (and of course you can buy network power). It's further a means of profit because PageRank is the reference point for advertising fees, through which network value gets transferred into huge monetary value.

How come that people barely know about the huge influence PageRank has on them? How could we find alternatives to page rank? What would a Degrowth activist do - would he just ignore the colonizing influence of Capitalist Big Data on people and his own political projects and try to promote regionalization instead, hoping his ideas will find enough followers? What if people would have to challenge Capitalist Big Data instead, to prevent something similar to the ecological apocalypse: cultural catastrophes imposed by Data exploitation?

Algorithms, Social Bots, apps and non-digital steering techniques like 'nudging' are more and more building the backbone of everyday life in industrialized countries. The main part of neoliberal economics worldwide is based on algorithmic trading, derivatives, and future speculation. The main political events in Western countries are stimulated by algorithmic treatments: Social Bots actively manipulated Brexit, Ukraine crisis and Trumps election campaign.

Those examples show: Contemporary capitalism is an object of high abstraction. It does not suffice trusting in immediate experience and suffering alone to grasp its main driving forces – we also need to take a look on the technologies creating and limiting our experience. What would be the most suitable political strategy to cope with those abstract instruments of power? How can we re-appropriate power for the sake of the people? Is it really the only thing we can do to plant some vegetables in a community garden, go to demonstrations and put up a tent at Wall-Street?

Proponents of the theory of Accelerationism say: No, we can and should do a lot more to overcome capitalism. Accelerationism is a new fashionable theory in avant-gardist left circles stressing the importance of technology

and high-scale solutions. They polemically position themselves not only against Degrowth, deceleration and but also against the main strands of left political practice today. Accelerationist thinkers criticize grassroot strategies, regional solutions, an imagery of a good & simple life and any kind of rhetoric evoking life styles and mindsets of the pre-modern age.

Before we contrast it with Degrowth, **let's take a deeper look into what Acceleration really means**. There's two versions, a vulgar exaggerated one and a serious intellectual theory – which are sometimes hard to distinguish. The first version is that Accelerationism means to make all things faster and worse, trying to make capitalism implode by pursuing its own contradictions: consuming more, harming the environment as much as possible and accelerate all processes until the system collapses. Often media coverage promotes such an image of the theory by headlines like: "Accelerationism - a mixture of Techno, Terminator and Marx"[1] Or "If normal capitalism is Mick Jagger, accelerationism is Jim Morrison."[2] But is serious accelerationism really different?: I quote Armen Avanessian: "The basic assumption of Accelerationism is, that the only radical political answer to capitalism is, to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding and abstracting tendencies […] and not to protest or to disrupt it."[3]

Isn't that exactly the same? No – we have to understand it correctly, even though it stays a risky project. **What are the main features of Accelerationism**:

1) The assumption „that neoliberal capitalism […] contains in itself the means for a transition towards post-capitalism."

2) We have to strategically make use of technological, cognitive and infrastructural means, associated with capitalism, in order to reach post-capitalism. "The existing infrastructure is not a capitalist stage to be smashed, but a springboard to launch towards post-capitalism." The acceleration pursued by accelerationism is not simply growing speed, it is pro-active, skillful use making of technologies and features deployed by the capitalist system, in order to transform it. [navigational]

3) We have to anticipate and speculate for different futures, no backwards orientation (romanticism, pre-modernism), criticizing from a future point, not from the past. They claim, "that we have to face the contradictions […] and cruelties of capitalism with a politically and theoretically progressive attitude"

- Technology speculation necessary, not sufficient "socio-pol. Action"
- Critique-paradigm, negative thinking
- small scale, pre-modern, local means for transition **only**.
- Capitalism is so pervasive and widespread that simple withdrawal, local solutions (even connected in networks) won't be enough to transform it. (disproportionality)

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[1]

[2] https://environmentalcritique.wordpress.com/2016/01/09/what-is-accelerationism/

[3] Akz 2, p 7

The best way to do so is probably to take a look at **accelerationist project ideas** – where the problem begins as only very sporadically actual projects have been launched.

Holding up a poster against the NSA is just disproportionate: Accelerationists would rather establish a Hackerspace. They are fostering the Open Source and Free Software movement, and vote for the introduction of a conditionless Basic Income. Networks on- and offline are of special importance: Think tanks like the neoliberal Mont Pellerin Society should emerge under post-capitalist premises. But also conceptual shifts are welcome. /cognitive mapping

A peculiar example I found was a Social Bot created by the German Amadeu Antonio Foundation: Social Bots are programs that use social media pretending to be a human being. The foundation aims at awareness raising for Anti-Semitism. Instead of giving a seminar on the topic or printing leaflets, the foundation created an algorithm on Twitter always replying some critical comment when somebody tweeted key words that were potentially anti-Semitic. The reactions were so harsh that they had to shut down the application.

- Crazy conceptual project: "DISCREET – an intelligence agency for the people", something similar to the NSA but for the sake of people

They search for project ideas making use of "informal and nondemocratically legitimized entities (like the Eurogroup or Troikas, arbitral TTIP courts)" in order to make use of the floating fragments of sovereignty for the common good. (see Agamben's 'state of emergency')

But To what kind of society should those measures lead? Accelerationists remain rather vague on that question: there's no conceptual work on the good post-capitalist life in accelerationism, apart from some (though strong) basic sketches: non-alienation, justice, unbound creativity, basic income, virtual and technical systems for the common good, ecological sustainability, and probably a lot of science fiction cinemas

How do they relate to each other and how can they benefit from the encounter?

Summing up we can say, they are both (left) political movements. They have an intellectual, theoretical wing as well as social movements linked with them. Both identify capitalism as the main obstacle for emancipation and free society, as both are calling for a socially just and environmentally-sufficient future society.

The main and striking difference: Acceleration is too techno-optimistic, supposedly adherent to green growth, and underestimating ecological limits to technology (yet they state in the manifesto: "climate change is the biggest problem" and that economic growth is a key issue of capitalism). Their framing of the Climate-Growth-Nexus would be: Because of the devastating climate impacts of Capitalism we have to surf the wave and navigate it to reasonable ends, if we don't do so no sufficiency or Degrowth agenda will be effective enough to stop the catastrophe from happening. If we want to overcome Capitalism and growth we have to use their means against themselves.

What lessons can Accelerationism draw from Degrowth?

- Accrediting planetary, economic, human boundaries, limits to growth

- Quitting illusions about green growth as an end
- Honoring direct action, small-scale practices, resistance, civil disobedience as means of action / resistance stays important
- Overcoming fatalism concerning capitalism, there are niches and alternatives
- Having debates on the good post-capitalist life = utopia without fetishisation of means
- Recognizing limited capacity of human body and psyche
- Getting a clue of inner and 'deep dimensions' of transformation (non-technical): emotional and social resonance emerging from collaboration, solidarity, group processes, participation, simple sufficient lifestyles etc. (how)
- Valuing transformation process quality, i.e the performative effects of using good, non-capitalist means
- Questioning male techno-centeredness (implying suppression of nature)

What lessons can Degrowth draw from Accelerationism?

- Tackling the 'enigma of digitalization', focusing more on how technical and digital power hinders Degrowth and how it could be used to catalyze Degrowth.
- Getting encouraged to pursue new and imaginative forms of activism, no coercion for projects to be small-scale, regional, directly experiencable
- Reframing existing Degrowth projects and theories with regard to broader strategies, horizons (umbrella organizations, networking power, crossbenching)
- Enabling activists to release themselves from certain fetishes, morals, purities of acitivist codexes (not using just 'clean' money from responsible donors , also allowing organic hierarchies sometimes etc., breaking with the rule of unlimited transparency), and dwelling more on efficiency, solution orientation, "mixed" forms = 'gnostic' activist paradigm
- (Meta-aspect) acknowledging that it is possible to reclaim and reappropriate realms deemed out of reach before
- Drawing inspiration how technological elements could be a part of a post-growth society
- Shifting the social imaginary of Degrowth from pre-modern lifestyles and action strategies to trans-modern; helping to build non-anachronistic, future-oriented social imaginary

What's Degrowth's task in one sentence: Starting more projects examining the digital, technological and cybernetic realm, as well as adjusting shifts in perspective and scope of already existing projects. Degrowth activists can easily apply some accelerationist spirit in their actions and thus 'accelerate Degrowth': You can go on planting in an urban gardening project, or building an intentional community, but really try to grasp your practice in terms of the bigger techno-hegemonic whole in which it is embedded, and actively asking questions like: How could this micro-practice could solve high-scale problems like food sovereignty for all, how could we build alliances with others working in the field? Is it possible to work with technological levers or at least: What are technological levers that work against our mission? Maybe a think tank or conference entitled "Technological obstacles and opportunities in Degrowth" could bring both movements together.

The easiest thing to do would be to shift your perspective: Do you see urban gardening as your individual search for a quiet zone or as a local political practice or do you frame it as an empowering experiment in search of new modes of living for a post-capitalist era? As Federico Demaria said in the Degrowth conference opening:

"Degrowth means different, not only less" I really hope we can say the same thing regarding the accelerationist renegades: "**Accelerationism means different, not only faster or worse**"